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SUBJECT: HONG KONG GOV'T PANEL REPORT ON MELAMINE
CONTAMINATION

REF: HONG KONG 1764

1. (SBU) Summary: The Hong Kong Government (HKG) has been working around the clock to test for melamine contamination; over 2,700 tests have resulted in over 34 imported products being pulled from store shelves. Over 41,700 children have been voluntarily tested for possible melamine related health problems; ten children have been identified in Hong Kong with kidney stones possibly linked to melamine consumption. On October 20, 2008 the HKG released a special report by the Expert Group on Melamine (the Expert Group) detailing HKG actions and making specific recommendations for future steps. These include implementing a more sustainable melamine contamination testing regime and passage of legislation empowering the government to prohibit the importation and order the recall of foods deemed dangerous to public health. Draft legislation is expected to be submitted to the Legislative Council (Legco) on November 4. Permanent Secretary for Health, Sandra Lee, told Econoff and Agricultural Attach on October 27 that the discovery of melamine in eggs imported from the Mainland on October 26 will lead to expanded testing in the short term, delaying plans to scale back testing to a more sustainable level.

2. (SBU) Comment: The HKG response to melamine contamination has been swift, transparent and effective. Despite an initial run on non-Mainland produced infant formula, public fears were quickly addressed and people seem confident in the HKG's response, but media interest continues to be high. Legco members from all political parties have lined up in support of the proposed legislation, all but assuring a quick passage.

The Expert Group on Melamine

3. (SBU) Responding to the mid-September discovery of melamine contaminated infant formula (REFTEL), the HKG established an Expert Group on the Melamine Incident on September 23. The Secretary for Food Health and Safety, Dr. York Chow, who chairs the Expert Group, is charged with protecting public health and recommending ways to prevent future food safety threats. The Expert Group is composed of members from both the public and private sectors with specific expertise in public health, food safety, the medical and academic community, and communications. The Group presented its findings and recommendations on October 20. In a public news conference, Chief Secretary for Administration Henry Tang endorsed the Group's recommendations and pledged to introduce legislation to allow the banning and recall of unsafe food products in Hong Kong.

Melamine Testing Results and Recommendations

14. (SBU) The Expert Group noted that the HKG Center for Food Safety (CFS) had announced melamine test results on over 2,700 food product samples, of which 34 (covering 15 brands imported from a number of countries) contained melamine above established limits. Retailers have voluntarily withdrawn from store shelves all products that tested positive. Noting the increased emphasis on quality control in China and the effect on other Hong Kong services, the Expert Group recommended the continued testing of raw and pasteurized/UHT milk from China, but called for the adoption of a more sustainable and targeted approach to testing. This would gradually reduce the quantity of samples tested from nearly 100 per day to around 100 per week as part of a standardized routine surveillance program.

15. (SBU) Permanent Secretary for Health and Vice Chairman for the Expert Group, Sandra Lee, told Econoff and Agricultural Attach on October 27 that the October 26 discovery of melamine in fresh eggs from the Mainland was unexpected and the HKG will now expand the testing regime to include chicken/other poultry, pork and farmed fish. The discovery of melamine in unprocessed animal products is likely the result of contaminated animal feed. Lee noted that the CFS is currently testing at capacity for melamine 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. CFS has briefed private firms capable of conducting the tests and is now considering out-sourcing some of the HKG testing to lessen the burden. The new testing requirements for fresh foods will delay plans to scale back

HONG KONG 00001999 002 OF 002

testing, however.

The Health Care Response to Melamine Contamination

16. (SBU) The Expert Group report praised the Center for Health Protection (CHP) and Hospital Authority for their screening programs and ability to allay public fear in the wake of the melamine discovery, noting that the CHP had handled over 9,866 telephone inquiries. After peaking at 1,876 calls on 25 September, inquiries fell to only 65 calls on 18 October. Referrals from the CHP hotline and walk-ins at specially designated Hospital Authority clinics have resulted in over 41,748 voluntary initial screenings of children under 12 (averaging between 500-600 per day) and over 12,394 secondary referrals for additional testing. CHP has identified 10 cases of children in Hong Kong to date with kidney stones suspected to be melamine-related. Based on the dramatic drop in inquiry calls and the falling demand for screening consultations, the Expert Group recommended the information hotline be scaled back to normal business operating hours. Voluntary screening clinics have already scaled back to regular operating hours but will continue to operate for an additional six months. Dr. Liza Kay, HKG Food and Health Bureau, told Econoff and Agriculture Attach on October 27 that the Health Bureau has an excellent working relationship with both the Guangdong and Central Government authorities and Mainland health organizations are fully cooperating with HKG authorities, including arranging a recent HK Health Bureau trip to Hubei province to discuss ongoing clinical evaluations and patient care.

The Authority to Ban Imports and Mandate Product Recalls

17. (SBU) Following the Expert Group recommendations, the HKG on October 24 released for public review proposed legislation to amend the current Public Health and Municipal Ordinance to give the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene authority to prohibit the importation or supply of any food which is determined to be of danger to public health and to direct that such food be recalled, impounded or otherwise destroyed.

(Note: under current law, HKG health authorities cannot ban the importation of suspected problem food and can only recommend food product recalls.) In discussing this proposal, Lee told Econoff that the unexpected discovery of melamine in eggs drove home the point how important passage of this legislation is. The HKG will formally present the bill to Legco on or about November 4. Members of all parties have spoken out in favor of the measure, which we expect to pass with little debate. An electronic version of the Expert Group Report is available on the HKG Food and Health Bureau Web Site at www.fhb.hk/en/index/html.

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